

Susana Romano Sued

The Castilian Language, a Mosaic of Languages: An Exercise of the Memory as a Genealogy and Archeology of Culture

1. The mosaic

Cultures resemble mosaics and can also be compared to palimpsests. Old manuscripts which bear the traces of former writings, scriptures that have been erased in order to be able to write upon them and that now display a new text, are called palimpsests. In painting, the process of overwriting, of correcting anterior brushstrokes is called *pentimento*. This is the name of the technique because the painter repents, that is, wishes to change a detail and applies another touch. This can be revealed by probing the canvas and revealing hidden brushstrokes and colors. I think that these designations, *pentimento*, palimpsest or mosaic are also adequate names for describing language. Using these concepts, we can meditate on language. And this also explains how I chose the title of the present meditation: *The Castilian language, a mosaic of languages*.

According to the dictionary a mosaic is the artistic work resulting from a combination of differently colored pieces of stone, glass, ceramics, arranged to form figures. In the combined pieces of cultures, crystallized into languages, contributions of individual communities and their tongues are continuously inscribed, contributions that have developed in the co-existence and exchange of various historical epochs and of multiple geographic settings. And these pieces add up like superimposed and interconnected layers, like soils worked over again and again, and sometimes they are hidden away in shame and can only be perceived in the telltale signs of fraud or coercion.

2. Meditations on memory

Memory is a faculty and a treasure. The collective upholding of memory hears the voices of the generations and writes them down on walls

and tablets, in codices and pieces of papyrus. Individual reminiscence relies on memory, on images that enter through the eyes, through the ears and that return when evoked: feeling the needle's mark on etchings, the rifts on the surface of the petroglyph.

The memory, at the same time the register and chest containing the origins and epochs of mankind, takes on – for some cultures – the phantasmic form of the *Absolute Book*.

In Psalm 139, which tells us about divine omniscience, we also hear of the book. The Book is the memory of God, the fundamental instrument for the Creator as Lord and Judge. It is here that the decisions about what is to be and what is not, what must be crossed out and what must remain, are inscribed. The completeness and closure of the text oppose the incompleteness and continued openness of the human interpretation of it. If the infinite dimension of the text is based on the open-endedness of possible readings, then the infinite dimension of memory is based on its mutability.

3. The Book. Borges

In numerous short stories and essays, Borges meditated on and wrote about the *Library* and the *Book* as metaphors for human memory. So we hear of a book of sand. This book is different from all other books because it is impossible to skip through it backwards and go back to the first page. Before getting to this first page, other pages impose themselves, pages that can't be retraced later on and disappear forever. The book rewrites itself again and again for the reader who – by chance – happens to be turning the pages. It is precisely this combination of diverse scriptures and readings that represents destiny as memory.

On the other hand, the palimpsest is the book that like the book of sand lacks a firm and definitive shape; it's a book set in motion. Thomas de Quincey, one of Borges' favorite authors, described exactly the technique by which the parchment can be made to carry different inscriptions successively. What in most remote antiquity had been a Greek tragedy could, in late antiquity, by way of careful preparations, be cleaned in order to capture and include an allegorical legend; and in the Middle Ages it could incorporate an epos of chivalry. The chem-

istry and philology of the time were capable of changing the direction of oblivion, now moving into the future, not backwards into the past.

So this is how the preservation of memory is linked to inscription, to mnemonic conservation which is, in turn, part of the world of the written letter. This world consists of traces upon traces, characters upon characters that the individual memory blends into a matrix, a place for continuous writing and rewriting of reminiscences.

Collective memory, like in a constantly recreated mirror, writes and recognizes itself in the memories of the beginning, of the cosmogonies. Here humanity is building backwards, moving towards the myth on a long road home, beyond the Phoenix (who – in even deeper strata – is resting on his own ashes) and towards his ancestors. This is the magic art of the philologist who turns chronological orders around and reads backwards in time: he or she turns the pages and finds the waystations of the itinerary through history.

The restitution, then, of what has been forgotten is the process of reading the written text: layer by layer one scripture attaches and copies itself onto another one, creating the enigmatic palimpsest of the human spirit as the dramatic testimony of the struggle between time and eternity.

The primordial scene towards which human memory orients itself is, for one cultural sphere, the pact that God sealed with the people of Israel. In the book of Deuteronomy the recollection of the first moment of liberation of the pact is the central motif along with the main imperative: recollection must mean loyalty, obedience and life; oblivion implies defeat, the return to Egypt and death. Memory and oblivion are eschatological antagonists in the drama of salvation.

Fables, stories of miracles and folklore are more manifestations of the world of memory in which oblivion is equated to death and exile, whilst recollection means salvation and the return home. Ever since the *Odyssey* up to today, the adventure of remembering is like a voyage to a submerged world – a voyage all epic heroes must undertake. Later on, memory opens up to Tradition, that is to say, preservation by inheritance and legacy. And this is where memory and tradition part and, drifting ever further apart, give rise to two new attitudes in the face of the past: on the one hand, the experience of being part of history, History turning away from man and leaving him alone in the solitude of time. On the other hand, the individual turns towards the

past, starts taking part in it and appropriates it by using his intuition and imagination. Even though the past is dead – or asleep –, genius and ingenuity, the creative spirit can awaken it, turn it back into life and restore it for the present. This is how the philologist, like the archeologist, probes into times gone by on the pages of human memory and reconstructs the past.

The *ars memoriae* of literary tradition therefore bears testimony to the difficulties and detours that memory-work has to go through when it is confronted with the fight for or against oblivion between the guardians of the ruins and the tamers of evocation.

The eternity of human creations interposes itself in time, up against the irredeemable finitude of a lifetime. Word and song are the consolation that accompanies man in the projection of his tradition into the future, his legacy to posterity. And this is why we see the moments of the evolution of a language in the texts of a given cultural sphere. Castilian spans over many cultural treasures, social, idiomatic and lexical imaginaries. What then does our language remember, and what does it forget of its vicissitudes and transgressions?

The daughter of multiplicity, the Castilian language rose from the agonizing dissemination of Medieval Latin, which fragmented and morphed into Romance languages, a Babel of new languages in this emerging Europe, fragmented like a mosaic of nations.

Up until the reign of king Alfonso X, Castilian as one of Latin's daughters still had to be considered Romance, a language full of imprecision and hesitation, always changing along with the loanwords from other languages. Alfonso X, king of Castile and León from 1252 to 1284, had a decisive influence on the usage of Castilian by declaring it the official language of Castile and creating an orthographic system that put an end to difficulties concerning the written representation of sounds. Thus Alfonso installed himself as the creator of Romance Castilian prose.

From that moment on, the complementary action of diffusion and reception of Castilian, peaceful or violent, prosperous or unfortunate, hasn't ceased and shows no signs of doing so today.

Let's not forget that the first examples of literature in Romance we have today are the so-called *jarcias*: these are short lyrical chants that consist of two, three or four verses that the poets, writing in Arabic or Hebrew, put at the end of larger poems called *moaxahas*. They are

oral lyrics written down in poems by men of letters or Hebrews who used them as a closing note to their *moaxahas*.

The existence of a very extensive corpus of lyrical poetry indicates a strong oral tradition, poetry we can only access through transcripts elaborated much later. This poetry consists of popular songs – usually about love – that were sung while laboring in the fields or at weddings, fairs and pilgrimages.

Given their Mozarabic character, the *jarcias* mixed Romance with Arabic words, as in this example:

Aman, Jah, habibi
Al wahs me no farás
Bon, besa me boquilla:
eo sé que no te irás

In the case of the Judeo-Spanish *romancero*, Hebrew words would be sprinkled in.

Quite similar to this orally communicated amorous register, we find the legacy of the *coplas*, like those of Jorge Manrique, deep reflections on the ephemerality of time and worldly things, on life and death, grounded in memory. Here is an example of what was said above: poetry as the memory of humanity. See the eternal verse of Jorge Manrique in ...

Coplas a la muerte de su padre
Recuerde el alma dormida
avive el seso y despierte
contemplando
cómo se pasa la vida,
cómo se viene la muerte
tan callando.
quan presto se va el plazer
cómo después de acordado,
da dolor
cómo a nuestro parecer
cualquier tiempo pasado
fue mejor

After poetry, the epic and other genres such as theater and prose (which would flourish from the books of chivalry on) came to Castilian. The *cantares de gesta* broke up. The troubadours that carried around with them the heroic deeds of the *Cid* in songs reduced these, for practical reasons, to a limited number of stanzas, preserving the

most important details. These texts gave birth to the *romances* which were passed on only orally.

The Spanish *romancero* has a long and uninterrupted tradition. The fact that the *romanceros* were carefully preserved by the Jewish communities when these emigrated from Spain after the expulsion of 1492 goes to show how carefully the past and its distinct registers were preserved in poetry. In this case, poetry written in Castilian, using the Hebrew alphabet, with Hebrew terms blending in as well.

4. The oral tradition and collective memory

Traditions are made and remade by telling them. Tucked away in the memory of those telling it, the oral text is brought up to the present by narrating it, usually in front of an audience, so that it may be memorized by a new generation of people bearing the tradition. For different reasons the text is constantly reinvigorated and modified, enriching the latent legacy.

The Spanish language in Latin America, by the way, is part of this culture and influenced by it. Literature as – in the south – an eminent and noble form of language is an obvious and privileged source for reading routes, waystations and origins. In the end, a palimpsest of considerable joy and considerable pain, reaching from the indigenous languages of this land to the foreigners who were covered by the warm blanket of the Castilian language.

The arrival of the Castilian language to America set in motion a process of accelerated blending with indigenous languages by acculturation. It also accelerated the disappearance of many of these languages for lack of a tradition of writing.

As George Steiner notes in *After Babel*, every year some of those languages that we consider “endangered” disappear. These are languages spoken in isolated or dying communities. Today, whole language-families are between life and death, flickering in the memory of some informants of high age. One could say that almost every instant some rich and vulnerable word or turn of phrase falls into total silence, most of all in the case of the American indigenous languages.

But here they are, texts that are sometimes transcriptions of the oral tradition and sometimes translated transcriptions; and there is, above all, this legacy or infinite treasure that within the language, in

the house of the Castilian language, takes up quarter in translations. These remind us of a memorable poetic term, the expressions of old traditions and the murmur of some creation from yesteryear. This murmur is carried along also through the infinite passages from one language to another in translation.

5. Digression on translation

Translation is one of the fundamental activities necessary to keep this memory alive, an activity whose archives have up until now been books in different languages, a medium that today is being substituted little by little by IT-based memories and digital hardware.

The passages and multiple crossings are a process of temporal, spatial and linguistic deferral that is of a similar relevance concerning translation as a practice, a process and a result in translated literature. This crossing bears the mark of the subject, the subjects. And as in the process of writing, creation emerges from the order of subjectivity and corresponds to the peripeties of the individual letter in its struggle against the laws of language, just like the writing in a translation fluctuates between the dimensions of identity and subjectivity. This is why the analysis and the comparison of the strategies chosen by the writer-translator can give us some hints about how desire takes its course, desire for the letter, for writing.

Literature, poetic texts – and already the Russian formalists taught us this – build their own universe of signification in which connected, conventional signifiers (arbitrary signifiers in Saussure's terms) recede, facilitating a flow of multiple signifiers which rise from all textual levels of signification. The denotative level leaves space for the floating "play" of connotations. The reconstruction of this multiplicity of meaning in the texts is the method and aim of every translation. The universe of connotation, when linked to denotation, creates the complicated and singular order of the poetic text, guiding its meaning.

In the crossing one passes through several stages. And the most important stage, articulating the languages, is the subjectivity of the translator, who is inscribed into his or her cultural background. Translation, when observed from the micro-perspective of a translator's work (an encounter with the text in a foreign language), brings different dimensions into play, creating a tension between them: his cultural

and literary background knowledge, his knowledge of the institutional world of literature and his relation to it, finally the depth of his subjectivity. It is at this point that interpretation gets going. Translating literature always means translating an interpretation of a literary work. To be more precise: it implies composing an all-inclusive interpretation of a literary work in a second language. One translates not only speech, but also what has been spoken, i.e. the meaning of the text. So the result of this specific process has to be seen as a literary work, and what has been translated into the second language, at least for him who reads it at home in the host-language, serves as a substitute to language, literature and culture. Interpretation takes place in the reconstruction of the original perspective.

The same tension that translation creates between cultures and the languages (and within which it installs itself) is involved in the process itself and can be found in the translator's gestures. Driven by his desire to translate, his desire for language, it finds a text as the consequence of and the answer to his wandering wishes, searching and beating a path between languages, guided by his ardor and his knowledge – which are not always in synch.

The subject, the translator who writes in his mother tongue, is confronted with the abyss beyond this language, confronted with language itself. Haroldo de Campos reminded us of the difference between “language” (*lengua*) and “speech” (*lenguaje*) and that in poetry it is imperative that the translation be made in terms of “speech”. He said this with regard to Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles, which were subject to most devastating criticism from his contemporaries and are now appreciated in good right for their unique contribution to the enrichment of German poetic language. Walter Benjamin praised these translations emphatically, reacting to those who criticized the supposed failures of the translation, accentuating the creativity of Hölderlin's “mistakes”.

We should remind ourselves that Walter Benjamin told us about a pre-Babylonian, angelic language that mankind could have received as a legacy from God. The disaster of Babel, the painful fragmentation was going to be soothed by the healing efforts of the poets, whose poetic universe would supposedly be completely expressed in this language. And translation would therefore recover all of its meanings.

In the translation's reproductive function, the works are part of tradition. This means that the translator, the interpreter, "the one who speaks in the interstice", reproduces legitimately and is legitimating his presence on the stage where he seizes the past, turning it into the live present: with a certain authority he takes a careful decision and thus fulfills the role of a connecting piece. On the one hand, the works come to us through history and tradition, talking with their mouths full, accompanied by everything that has been said (interpreted) about them. On the other hand, there is the process of re-reading (interpreting) again for today's audience, and here we have the transmission itself, and then the new words are pronounced, those that the process of interpretation favored.

If we listen closely for the impulse of lyricism, auscultating language, we realize that the smooth flow of poetry depends much more on the impact that foreign texts produce in the host language, a language which makes room for the translator's subjectivity. The translator is auscultating (at the same time) that which is on its way in and what his own language offers in the way of hospitality. I myself take translation to be an event that makes the Diaspora of writing possible, a dissemination and a flowering of meaning thanks to which literature subsists beyond its borders.

This act has been repeated innumerable times since the beginning of writing itself, it has guaranteed the survival of literature thanks to its sending it beyond the shores, beyond the borders of the original languages to diasporic soils, performing time and again the metaphor of the ferryman/translator who transports his precious cargo from one shore to the other. The process that in the German language is denominated so adequately "über-setzen": to transport/to translate. The precious cargo transported here sometimes won't see the light, remains latent and hidden in some corner of culture.

According to the facts established by ethnic history there is a hidden literature dating from ancient times, from before the arrival of Columbus, which tells us about how a collective identity was created, a fact that the practice and know-how of the noble indigenous people bear witness to today. It is this language, a different language, that American Castilian has built itself and its *œuvres* on, be it under the shroud of silence, or be it in coexistence with more hospitable writing. José María Arguedas, the Andean anthropologist, revealed to the cre-

oles the existence of utopian and messianic narrations in Quechua and incorporated them into his literary works. Indigenous oral poetry survived oblivion thanks to the explorations of some archeologists that gave us knowledge about the ritual worship to the Inca, cosmogonic words of the Guaraní, Aztecs and Mayas in Chiapas, to name just some of the constellations of oral creation that used to live in our America.

These are words that remind us of the fact that we live in and co-exist with our language, that we take possession of it and that it takes possession of us, that it houses us, that we inherit it, a living organism that creates and re-creates itself through poetry. Every poetic expression, as a poetic action, is a reminder of the human species and a legacy to the future.

This language that I have called a palimpsest, a *pentimento* and a mosaic, Castilian, the community's language, is at the same time identical and different to the language every one of us speaks. The language in which we were named even before we were born, the first we were to hear is the language that molds us and turns us into subjects.

Although this language is determined by the grammar of the social and national language, it nevertheless bears the marks of what the family and our parents have passed on to us. It will be the force of order and guidance, our fate, the road we walk on as unique individuals.

We know that no matter how many times we move from one place to another in the world in a Diaspora (this is what I call a translation), we carry with us the gestures, the voices, distilled from the base of the mother tongue. *Lalangue*, Lacan called it. It intertwines with the common language and becomes singular and unique once again in the poem, in narration, in the drama. It traverses the genealogies, shows itself in the spoken phrases, and resonates in the echo of the lullabies.

In my case Arabic is the ore; together with Hebrew, it is the natural resource to my hearing, my writing, and it makes a mosaic of Castilian.

The voices of the grandparents, the songs, the names of the food, the whisper of secrets – all of these come back to me time and again and accompany my own voice.

I come from a Jewish family, originally from Syria, from both sides. My mother, born in Damascus, came to Argentina as a very

young girl; she came on a boat, just like everybody else, and brought with her the aromas, the tastes and the worries. Her language was Arabic intermingled with French, the languages of the better-to-do families in Damascus. Therefore my aunts, my mother's older sisters, had names such as Adèle, Rachèle, Victoire. Sometimes, in Damascus, they were ashamed when somebody heard them speak Arabic. My mother, Sara, was six years old when she came to Argentina and her Castilian had no foreign accent.

My father, son of Syrians, got to know my mother in Argentina. Their respective families knew each other. My father got to know my mother after coming back from a longer stay in Jafo, Palestine. In those days Arabic was the *lingua franca*. My father's family in Jafo spoke Arabic, thought in Arabic, cooked in Arabic. My father learned to write and read in that language. My father and mother shared the secret of the Arabic language, which they did not teach me, nor did they teach my brothers and sisters. I only learned some words, fragments of songs. And Arab cooking because all the meals prepared in my house, as well as in the homes of my aunts and grandparents, were Arab meals.

When I was a small child we lived in a neighborhood where there were many families from the Middle East, from Syria, from Egypt, from Lebanon. All families did their shopping in the Syrian-Lebanese store. There we supplied ourselves with *tahine*, with *parra* leaves, with *zatar*, with *jalva*, with *fila* and with *baclawa*. Also with *cuajo*, to prepare the *laban* and the cardamom for the coffee or the seeds of *sesm*, of *burgol* wheat, of *baharat*. Jewish Arabs and Christian Arabs were all in the same club, the older ones playing cards, and the little ones playing together. My grandparents, my uncles and my parents, all in the textile business, did their wholesale shopping in the stores of the Arabs, buying wherever it seemed right, without discrimination.

When I was very young, my parents used to take me to the concerts of an Arab orchestra from Córdoba, the Azur Chami orchestra. He came from a Syrian family that had first migrated to Chile. Azur Chami's vocation was singing. Azur played the lute, the *derbeke*, the tambourine. He had put together his orchestra and his repertoire included Argentinean folk songs and popular South American tunes that he translated himself and adapted to Arabic, such as the *carnavalito* or the *cha cha cha*. This was Azur Chami's thing, roaming from village

to village, from city to city with the sounds and the lyrics that populated my childhood. Some of these songs, fragments of them, I learned playfully, just like I learned the diverse ways of dancing and cooking.

Now they all live in my poetry, where I remember and listen, feel the tastes, all in their own Arabic, Hebrew and Semitic names. Voices and tastes that have stuck on to me, in me, precious pieces that form a colorful mosaic.

I have gone to many different places and I have lived in different languages. And the Arabic, like the Hebrew, Portuguese, German, French, Latin language all appear incessantly in verse, in the murmurs.

From *Diario de hija*:

I

No te devuelve mi voz la gratitud del primer murmullo
alojada la memoria sonora
en mi propio pabellón.

En la caracola del oído no entra mi saludo
no entra la palabra del mundo,
ni la campanada del angelus
ni el adiós

Entran los ruidos de la memoria.
entra solamente el pregón del vendedor de cuajada en el mercado
de Jafo;
moja las comisuras
entra el laberinto.

Entra la arena aventada por las ventanas de los tíos.
Entra el trigo sarraceno,
El triguillo esquirado de mortero
la mancha bruna ha tenido cría.

II

Asomado a la ventana del cuarto de Jafo,
almacena el pregón que está húmedo y blanco de la cuajada:
¡Aj laban!, ¡Aj laban!. El jarro se hunde en el tacho de leche agria.
Luego se reparte en los tazones de los primos,
sobre las hojas de parra que envuelven el arroz
Todavía no he nacido

I carry this treasure with me, the treasure that turns and returns in my writing, which is memory turned letter and tongue, the word of poetry. Just like in *Diario del Habla* [...]

En el umbral de la lengua se alzan las grafías de escritos antiguos; es el hebreo, es el árabe, es el sefaradí de mis mayores, admonición sobre la palabra y sobre los treinta y seis justos que sostienen el mundo. El hebreo emparentado, mezclado a los dialectos de la aldea, lejos de la lengua de los asesinos.

Residuos, ruinas, vestigios; el corte en la garganta para la prosodia desconocida. No me muerde aún el idioma. Apenas ha hundido sus colmillos en el corazón de lo gregario; la comunidad, deshecha y esparcida por las diásporas, me confina en lo callado.

Gutural, materna, la lengua de oriente rumia en la duna y en la alta barda costea los restos de coral, y sangra.

Carga los hijos en la espalda; no habla.

Las rimas gorjean en la melodía del destierro mientras las voces desentonan aquí y allá; son las afonías de la despedida, son las endechas mudas, espigando la orilla del corazón biendicho. De noche, los tártaros abandonan el desierto; merodean al borde del sueño, sacan provecho del cansancio y dejan prefijos encajados entre las palabras graves, en las arcadas. Hoy he cedido a la entonación, a la rima pobre, a la desinencia. A la cancelación sonora de la procedencia. Me nace una frase monstruosa en un giro de aliento que alberga una pausa entre tono y tono.

Agumarina es una piedra dura, es un peso en el cabo de la cuerda que me mete al mar. Tengo una lengua, una sola, que no es la mía.

E'lbi, E'lbi

As my language is whipped by other tongues it turns into a safe haven for the idioms of the past and present. I strive for the meridians which disappear every time poetry visits me:

Una pizca de sal muerde la herida (from: *El Meridiano*)

Has sanado

Ahora

Más tarde

Los bargueños hinchados de cuajada

De sésamo y almendras

De anís y de puntillas

Convidan a las manos

Los dedos curtidos en salmuera

En casas de nadies

Redoblan el oriente

El ladino y el árabe

A veces el hebreo

And this is how the echoes of these voices, of these languages, of these smells and tastes cradle themselves in the poetic word that in-

habits me, a word that has its shelter in Castilian, to which I pay tribute, for it treated me to its special eleven-syllable rhythm:

Si lo hablado es memoria en la palabra
y lo escrito memoria de memoria
en el poético decir se labra
la doble marca que se llama historia
Y la lengua se teje en otras lenguas
con hebras de tramado castellano
mosaico de las voces que sin mengua
nombran la esencia y también lo vano
Cada decir con los decires suma
todo el idioma y todas las presencias
y el castellano leve como espuma
el peso lleva de numerosa herencia
En el árabe dice de hermosura;
en el sefaradí de la mancura;
y en el talit sagrado la blancura;
y en el Libro consagra la escritura
Y pliega en capas y mantos de leyendas
de lágrimas, dolores, y de ofrendas
el salmo, el versículo, el poema
el largo cuento y el tenaz emblema.